

**Talk given by Rosemarie Willett for the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc.  
at Albert Hall public meeting, 24 May 2007**

The Griffins had 3 passions which sustained their total commitment to their profession – nature, democracy and art. They believed these were fundamental human needs; the plan for Canberra was conceived to foster this way of life. Nature was teacher of fundamental laws and provider of spiritual sustenance and regeneration. Human beings should live in harmony with nature.

The irony of the amendments bannered as 'The Griffin Legacy' is that we now face cultural change imposed by climate change and these amendments put at risk the world's only national capital plan conceived in deference to nature.

Griffin's definition of democracy was 'independence of thought' – before you regard this as commonplace think for a moment that he meant thought untrammelled by allegiance to powers – everywhere we look today we see allegiances – eg political and material - which dominate our thought. Griffin believed that individuals in democracy should take responsibility to form a view, and should respect the views of others, competition and merit. Effective consultation is vital in the determination of which views to act upon; democracy requires government to take into account feedback from consultation.

Griffin's definition of art was 'doing things right' – a pragmatic definition based on intelligent creativity. For Griffin, the art of urban planning and architecture, involved – for example

- analysis of site conditions and the functional brief and the solving of that equation for the mutual benefit of the site and the occupants;
- the use of geometry in design and transcending that geometry with a mastery of space and form in both architecture and the landscape.

For Canberra, this theory was the underpinning of a functional, organic plan which is a total work of art. So what does this have to do with Draft Amendment 53?

The Albert Hall itself has little to do with Griffin except that it addresses Commonwealth Avenue in a manner sympathetic to the Griffin plan. As a historic building valued by the community, it is eminently suitable as the landmark associated with the approaches to Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, while being of suitable height and mass not to detract from the national triangle and the vista to Parliament House.

The precinct around the Albert Hall is largely to do with the open space of the lake shores, with the enjoyment of the natural beauty of Black Mountain and the beauty of the ornamental waters of the lake. The vista of treed mountain slopes which appears to extend to the lake shores is a rare beauty for the centre of a city and should continue to be enjoyed in our city.

Even more than Griffin's geometric basins, the NCDC's naturalesque shoreline of the lake needs natural open space for shoreline definition as a land form. Open space - westwards of the Albert Hall, and around the gentle southern approach to Commonwealth Avenue bridge - is evident in all Griffin's plans. Spatial definition is the armory of Griffin's art and crowding of forms, cluttering of space, blurring of spatial definition have nothing to do with Griffin - and, if allowed to happen, will suffocate what is left of his art.

Parliament House is the focus of every view over the city and glimpsed from numerous parts of Canberra. In the wider vistas of the central area, the flag mast of Parliament House is delicate in form and scale, yet unchallenged by any built form or mass in the landscape and very powerful. It gains its power from Griffin's spatial geometry of the triangle and the alignment and scale relationship of all buildings within the triangle with Mt Ainslie and Black Mountain, along the land and water axes. This monumentality and unity in the public, central area of Canberra strengthens the focus on Parliament House. It is a subtle and powerful focus.

In the search for an urban heart for Canberra why don't we look at Griffin's plan? There, we will not see dispersed centres in building scatters or even a great central European style public square for the people. In keeping with a people living in harmony with nature, in the midst of urban density Griffin planned a Plaisance - a park promenade, rather like Frederick Law Olmstead's Mall in Central Park New York, leading from broad public gardens, recreational and cultural buildings at the lake side to tea gardens, sculpture gardens and nature trails on Mt Ainslie. The key is open public space located at the heart of urban density; this heart should be centrally located in the geometry of a horizontal city.

Draft Amendment 53 does not reflect the Griffin legacy. We are prepared to give our full support to the NCA, but only for proposals commensurate with the high standards set by Griffin.

Demonstrably one of the great works of art of the twentieth century, Griffin's plan is one where even the angels should fear to tread.